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FROM U.S. MISSION IN ROME

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SUBJECT: USAID Humanitarian Attache visits Mauritania
September 13-17, 2003

REF: (A) NOUAKCHOTT 00740

SUMMARY

[¶1.](#) US Mission/Rome humanitarian attache visited Mauritania September 13-17, and traveled in the drought affected regions of Bareina, Aleg and Boghe. Assessments of this area show a serious emergency situation. Many vulnerable groups, particularly children, will require continuing food and non-food support to meet their basic needs, for the foreseeable future. End summary.

Background

[¶2.](#) US Mission/Rome Humanitarian Attache visited Mauritania September 13-17, 2003, and traveled in the drought affected regions of Bareina, Aleg and Boghe with WFP emergency unit and partner (Oxfam) personnel. Mauritania is currently affected by a serious food crisis caused by recurring drought that is becoming endemic, and increasing rural destitution. Without effective intervention, this humanitarian crisis could result in a famine outcome. Following an international appeal by the Government of Mauritania to assist 800,000 drought-affected, WFP approved, on December 19, 2002, an emergency response to cover the immediate needs of 420,000 Mauritanians. WFP has established implementing partnerships with four international NGOs (Oxfam GB, World Vision, Lutheran World Federation and ACORD) to ensure efficient emergency management and distribution.

[¶3.](#) The Islamic Republic of Mauritania (about twice the size of France or roughly the size of Texas and New Mexico combined) attained independence in 1960. While there is some opposition, it is essentially run by one party and continues to experience ethnic tensions between its minority black population and the dominant Maur (Arab-Berber) populace. Its present population is estimated at 2.91 million, with the bulk of the citizenry concentrated in the cities of Nouakchott and Nouadhibou, and along the Senegal River in the southern part of the country.

[¶4.](#) Half the population depends on agriculture and livestock for their livelihood, even though many of the nomads and subsistence farmers were forced into the cities by recurrent droughts in the 1970s and 1980s. According to FAO, Mauritania's cultivable area is estimated at about 20 million hectares (49 million acres), of which irrigation potential, given the soil resources, is 257,000 hectares. At present, the average cost of irrigation development varies between USD 2,200/hectare for small schemes to about USD 12,500 for larger endeavors. The nation's coastal waters are among the richest fishing areas in the world, but overexploitation by foreign interests threatens this key source of revenue. External debt (2000 estimate) is USD 2.5 billion. GNP is calculated at USD 370. Since 1981, the United States has provided to Mauritania about USD 100 million in economic and food assistance. USAID ceased its operations in Mauritania in 1991.

[¶5.](#) The country is chronically food deficit with cereal production averaging in normal years some 149,000 metric tons per year - about 37 percent of requirements.R BROWN, AFR/WA, DCHA/D/FFP

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"Snapshot" on present state of food insecurity

16. USAID's FEWS NET (September 30, 2003) Alert for Mauritania reports "Improved pasture, higher livestock prices and a fall of cereal prices have eased the burden on pastoralist families. Families living in most agricultural areas can expect the best harvest in many years. The positive prospects for the imminent harvest, however, only represent a first step toward recovery. Continuing food distribution to vulnerable groups and investment in recovery with non-food resources remain essential for reducing the vulnerability of Mauritanians to future shocks."

17. Latest WFP vulnerability assessment (VAM) studies (September 2003) show 19 percent of the country's population suffers from acute malnutrition, compared to an average of 10 percent for sub-Saharan Africa. Note: This is a significant deterioration relative to earlier comparable studies, from WFP in March 2002, and a Demographic and Health report (EDS 2001). End note.

18. An additional 40 percent of children under-five suffer from chronic malnutrition. The under-five mortality rate is high at 105 per 1,000 live births and the maternal mortality rate is equally high at 930 per 100,000 live births.

19. The most vulnerable populations are concentrated in the "Aftout Triangle," an area 500 kilometers southeast of the capital Nouakchott near the border with Senegal and Mali. Note: the disaster response effort to date has not been adequate in ebbing the flow of acute malnutrition. End note.

10. Further, as per a FEWS NET release dated October 7, "Food conditions and prospects continue to worsen in the river valley and in the Aftout. To date, there has been no consistent program for correcting the 204,589 metric ton annual cereal production shortfall. The dizzying rise in the price of staple foodstuffs, at a time when many households have lost their small livestock and when they cannot count on ecological supplementation (gathering) has outpaced the survival strategies developed by rural populations; many households are already living under pre-famine conditions."

11. As per FEWS NET, even if this present rainy season proves copious, farmers face four major obstacles: a) shortage of seeds - there will be country-wide cutbacks in the size of areas planted in rain fed crops if seed access does not improve; b) shortage of manpower - farming areas have been virtually drained of their workforce; c) erratic pasture production- the so-called "waltz of the animals" has begun which will force replanting of fields several times due to damage from straying animals; and d) cutbacks in irrigation schemes - given the acknowledged serious shortages of improved seeds, fertilizer, mechanical plows and pesticides. In sum, the situation is (and is likely to remain) extremely unstable.

U.S. Mission/Rome conclusions and recommendations

12. Drought is becoming the rule rather than the exception in Mauritania; the country has experienced drought in four of the past five years. It is suggested that WFP seriously LAS SECTION 03 OF 04 ROME 004850

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consider conversion of its ad hoc emergency (EMOP) approach into a longer-term protracted relief and recovery (PRRO) operation. Note. As a recent IDS-Save UK study on Ethiopia observed: "the most common proximate cause of destitution is catastrophic and recurrent crop failures mainly associated

with agricultural droughts but also due to other hazards, such as pests." End note.

¶13. WFP is presently partnered with four international non-governmental organizations (NGOs). While laudable, it must begin to focus on recruitment and strengthening of local, indigenous NGOs.

¶14. WFP's ability to conduct emergency needs assessments should be strengthened. In particular, WFP should strive to better understand how pastoralists use food aid and make appropriate adjustments to its program in those areas.

¶15. WFP, as one of the most active U.N. agencies (if not the most active) working in Mauritania, should advocate for more involvement from other U.N. agencies and the "line ministries" such as the Ministry of Health, to tackle food security and health issues.

¶16. WFP continues to "sit-on" 25.57 million Ouguiya (the Mauritanian local currency), approximately USD 100,000, of USG PL 480 Title II Section 206 funds turned over to the WFP country office in 1993. The continuing inability of WFP to spend these funds and close out this account is an organizational embarrassment that calls into question WFP's implementation capacity in Mauritania. It is suggested that this money might best be spent in strengthening activities and capacities of local NGOs.

¶17. WFP should actively encourage the government to undertake an immediate campaign to give top priority to feeding children, as endorsed by the Mauritanian Minister of Education at the WFP sponsored conference on the Alliance for Action on School Feeding in the Sahel (held in Dakar) in September.

¶18. Warehousing of WFP commodities in GOM storage facilities particularly in Nouakchott, does not conform to international standards.

¶19. It is alleged that the national trucking consortia (FNT) effectively blocks competition, provides unreliable service, and demands rates higher than those charged for comparable hauling services in other Sahelian countries. As per ref A, the Federation National des Transport's monopoly - where costs are the highest in the region despite low wages and the low price of gas - has caught the attention of the World Bank. It is suggested that the WFP Executive Director address this issue in a letter to the President of Mauritania.

¶20. The installation of WFP's financial system WINGS and commodity tracking system COMPAS, including WFP direct financial control of its operations, is seen as a priority.

¶21. It is suggested that WFP explore strengthening its relationship with the private sector, particularly with Grand Moulin de Mauritanie (GMM). WFP may wish to consider requesting non-fat dried milk (NFDM) from USDA (Section 416 b) as it pursues options related to production of an indigenous blended food (used for weaning) - along the lines of its discussions in Senegal related to "Chocosen." STRATOR NATSIOS, D/A SCHIECK, AA/DCHA
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¶22. WFP's VAM unit is advised to strengthen its linkages with FEWS, Oxfam, and FAO's GIEWS - in terms of better documentation of drought and destitution trends.

¶23. WFP needs to develop a better partnership with FAO on drought response. US Mission/Rome will work with FAO Headquarters to strengthen its emergency outreach in Mauritania. FAO Mauritania needs to focus its attention on a more complete and comprehensive emergency needs assessment for seeds and on developing a common methodology for emergency seeds interventions with its government and NGO partners.

¶24. WFP needs to tighten up its local cost calculation matrices while increasing its dialogue with NGO partners related to the delivery of WFP relief supplies. Note. Donors in general should prioritize increasing resource flows to local NGOs. End note.

¶25. It is suggested that, if appropriate, the U.S. explore a Title I bilateral assistance program, with local currencies generated for use in drought response efforts and other development projects.

¶26. We also underline the importance, for both the UN and international donors, of giving equal priority to food and

non-food needs in Mauritania to ensure the most complete emergency response possible. Hall

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